

THE GAMBIA 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom, although police arrested and detained ten members of the Ndigal community in the Lower Saloum district of the Central River Division for observing the Eid al-Adha feast on a different date than the one declared by the Supreme Islamic Council. The Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education also closed two private schools after school administrators refused to provide basic Islamic education classes.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. embassy regularly engaged with government officials, religious groups, and religious leaders concerning religious tolerance and the importance of respect for religious freedom. The embassy hosted iftars where participants emphasized a message of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.9 million (July 2013 estimate). Sunni Muslims constitute more than 90 percent of the population. The majority is Malikite Sufi and the main orders represented are Tijaniyah, Qadiriya, and Muridiyah. Small numbers of first generation immigrants from South Asia are Shafi Sunnis. Sufi orders pray together at common mosques. There are also small numbers of non-Sufi Muslims, including members of the Ahmadiyya and Ndigal Muslim communities.

An estimated 9 percent of the population is Christian. Most Christians are Roman Catholic. There are also Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, and a number of evangelical groups. Approximately 1 percent of the population practices indigenous animist religious beliefs, though many maintain some traditional practices while adhering to their Muslim or Christian beliefs. There is a small community of Hindus among South Asian immigrants and business persons.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

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The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom. The constitution provides for “freedom to practice any religion and to manifest such practice.”

The constitution establishes *qadi* courts, with Muslim judges trained in the Islamic legal tradition, in specific areas that the chief justice determines. The *qadi* courts sit in each of the country’s seven regions and apply traditional Islamic law. Their jurisdiction applies only to marriage, divorce, custody over children, and inheritance questions for Muslims. Islamic law also applies to interfaith couples where there is one Muslim spouse. Non-*qadi* district tribunals, which deal with issues under customary and traditional law, apply Islamic law, if relevant, when presiding over cases involving Muslims. A five-member *qadi* panel has purview over appeals regarding decisions of the *qadi* courts and non-*qadi* district tribunals relating to Islamic law.

The Supreme Islamic Council is an independent body that advises the government on religious issues. Although not represented on the council, the government provides the council with substantial funding. The country’s president serves as the minister of religious affairs and maintains a formal relationship with the council.

The government does not require religious groups to register. Faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) must meet the same registration and licensing requirements as other NGOs.

The law requires all schools (except international schools) to provide religious education that “cater [to the] pupil’s religions.” Both public and private schools throughout the country provide biblical and quranic studies with minimal government interference, although the government provides religious studies teachers to private schools if the schools are unable to do so.

Government Practices

The government occasionally targeted minority Muslim groups, such as the Ndigal community, for advocating religious practices not condoned by the Supreme Islamic Council. In October police arrested 10 members of the Ndigal community in the Lower Saloum district, Central River Division, for observing the Eid al-Adha feast on a different date than the one declared by the Supreme Islamic Council. The detainees were held for ten days and released with no formal charges.

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In December the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education closed two private schools after school administrators refused to provide basic Islamic education classes for its Muslim students as prescribed by law. Even though the two schools had a majority of Muslim students, the schools refused to allow the Ministry to provide an Islamic studies teacher to supplement the curriculum, which included Christian religious studies.

Government meetings and events typically commenced with two prayers, one Islamic and one Christian. The government often invited senior officials of both religious groups to open major government events with prayers. The vice president, a Muslim, delivered an annual Christmas message on behalf of the president and lauded the country's "cross-faith relations."

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The Interfaith Group for Dialogue and Peace, comprised of representatives from the Muslim, Christian, and Bahai communities, met regularly to discuss matters of mutual concern, such as religious freedom and the need to live together in harmony. The Interfaith Group included minority religious groups represented by the Gambia Christian Council, which includes three Christian denominations: Anglican, Catholic, and Methodist.

Intermarriage between Muslims and Christians was common.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy regularly engaged with government officials and religious leaders and encouraged continued respect for religious freedom and tolerance. The U.S. Ambassador and, in his absence, the Charge d'Affaires hosted several iftars with religious leaders, where participants reinforced a message of religious tolerance and inter-faith dialogue.

The Ambassador expressed support for religious freedom by attending religious events of all principal religious groups. In meetings with religious leaders, embassy officers promoted religious tolerance and respect.